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AUSTRALIANS' LITERACY SKILLS PUT TO THE TEST

THE SURVEY OF ASPECTS OF LITERACY

For the first time, comprehensive statistical information is available about the literacy skills of adult Australians (aged 15-74). The Survey of Aspects of Literacy (SAL), conducted in 1996, was a national survey designed to measure some elements of Australians' literacy and numeracy skills.

The 'literacy and numeracy skills' covered in the survey were 'the information processing skills necessary to use printed material found at work, at home, and in the community'. The survey focused on 'functional literacy and numeracy' - those skills necessary to understand and use information from material which is printed in English and found in everyday life. The SAL objectively assessed three types of literacy:

Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of prose texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.

Document literacy: the ability to locate and use information contained in materials such as tables, schedules, charts, graphs and maps.

Quantitative literacy: the ability to perform arithmetic operations using numbers contained in printed texts or documents.

Consistent with international practice, these are also referred to as the prose, document and quantitative scales.

For each of these three scales, skill levels were assessed on a continuum ranging from Level 1 (very poor skills) through to Level 5 (very good skills). Because Level 5 is a comparatively small group, Level 4 and Level 5 are combined in most instances.

HOW GOOD ARE AUSTRALIANS' LITERACY SKILLS?

The skill level distribution of people aged 15-74 was similar on each of the prose, document and quantitative literacy scales. About 2.6 million people had very poor skills (Level 1) and could be expected to experience considerable difficulties in using many of the printed materials that may be encountered in daily life. About 3.6 million were at Level 2, and could be expected to experience some difficulties in using many of the printed materials that may be encountered in daily life. Level 3 was the largest category, and the skills of the 4.8 million people at this level would enable them to cope with many printed materials found in daily life and at work, though not always with a high level of proficiency. Some 2.0 million people were at Level 4, representing good skills, and a relatively small number (300,000) were at Level 5, representing very good skills. People at both Level 4 and Level 5 are considered capable of managing the literacy demands of everyday life. The remainder of this article highlights some key aspects of the distribution of Australians' literacy skills.

AGE

Younger people tended to have higher levels of literacy than older people. Compared with older people, larger proportions of people aged under 45 had good skills (Level 4/5), with the exception of those aged 15-19. Many 15-19 year olds will not yet have completed their education and will have little work experience, and therefore their literacy skills may develop further. The literacy skills of people aged 45 and over declined markedly with age. Some 41%-46% of those aged 65-74 had very poor skills, and three-quarters were at Levels 1 and 2. This may be related to greater proportions of older people having lower educational attainment levels, and/or the relatively high rate of disabilities (some of which would affect literacy skills) among older people.

SEX

There were larger proportions of females at high levels of prose literacy for most age groups. However, in the 55-74 year age group, the proportion of males at Level 4/5 was greater than the proportion of females, possibly due to the (previous) better educational and labour force opportunities for males in this age group. On the quantitative scale, the proportions of males with Level 4/5 skills were larger than the corresponding proportions of females across all age groups. In total, 22% of males were at Level 4/5, compared with 14% of females. On the document scale, the proportions of males and females with good skills (Level 4/5) were similar for those aged under 45, but older males tended to have better document skills than older females.

LANGUAGE

Of people who did not speak English as their first language, between 43% (on the quantitative scale) and 48% (on the prose scale) were at Level 1, representing approximately one million people. In comparison, of people whose first language was English, 14% (on each scale) were at Level 1, about 1.5 million people. Some 18%-20% of those whose first language was English were at Level 4/5, compared with 7%-8% for those whose first language was not English.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES LIVING IN URBAN AREAS

Significantly greater proportions of Indigenous peoples living in urban areas were at low literacy levels compared with other people who spoke English as their first language, and their skills showed more variation across the three scales. Some 41% were at Level 1 on the prose scale, 45% were at Level 1 on the document scale, and 47% were at Level 1 on the quantitative scale. Different levels of educational attainment may explain these results to some extent. Some 62% of Indigenous peoples did not complete the highest level of secondary school (the corresponding proportion for other people whose first language was English was 36%).

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In general, greater proportions of people with high skill levels had high levels of educational attainment compared with those at lower skill levels. For example, 65% of people at Level 4/5 on the prose scale had a post-school qualification, compared with 22% of people at Level 1.

10.18 NUMBER AND PROPORTION AT EACH SKILL LEVEL

| Skill level | Prose scale | | Document scale | | Quantative scale | |
|-------------|-------------|------|----------------|------|------------------|------|
| | '000 | % | '000 | % | '000 | % |
| Level 1 | 2,607.4 | 19.7 | 2,580.3 | 19.5 | 2,531.8 | 19.2 |
| Level 2 | 3,631.9 | 27.5 | 3,738.3 | 28.3 | 3,590.8 | 27.2 |
| Level 3 | 4,668.9 | 35.3 | 4,774.2 | 36.1 | 4,764.0 | 36.0 |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Level 4 | 2,052.7 | 15.5 | 1,880.8 | 14.2 | 2,011.9 | 15.2 |
| Level 5 | 259.9 | 2.0 | 247.2 | 1.9 | 322.3 | 2.4 |
| Total | 13,220.8 | 100.0 | 13,220.8 | 100.0 | 13,220.8 | 100.0 |

Source: Aspects of Literacy: Assessed Skill Levels, Australia, 1996 (4228.0).

LABOUR FORCE STATUS

There was a clear relationship between literacy skill level and labour force status. Depending on the literacy scale, 11%-12% of employed people were at Level 1. The corresponding percentages for unemployed people were 30%-31%, and for those who were not in the labour force the proportions were even larger. The proportions at Level 2 within each labour force category were similar, but significantly larger proportions of employed people were at Levels 3 and 4/5, compared with unemployed people and those not in the labour force.

INCOME

Just 6% of people at Level 1 on the prose scale received an annual income in the highest quintile, compared with 30% of people at Level 4/5. Some 63% of people at Level 1 on the prose scale were in the two lowest income quintiles. The income distributions for Levels 2 and 3 were similar to the distribution for the total population. The results on the document and quantitative scales were similar, but the proportion of people at Level 4/5 on the quantitative scale who were in the top income quintile was the highest of all scales, at 37%. This may be because greater proportions of males were at Level 4/5 on the quantitative scale compared with females, and males tend to have larger incomes.

LITERACY-RELATED ACTIVITIES

On each of the three scales, larger proportions of people at the higher skill levels undertook literacy-related activities at least once a week compared with those at lower skill levels. The proportions of people at Level 1 who had more than 25 books, a dictionary, or a daily newspaper in the home were markedly smaller than the corresponding proportions of people at higher skill levels. Having more than 25 books in the home appeared to be more closely related to performance on the prose scale than did having a dictionary or a daily newspaper. On the prose scale, 70% of people at Level 1 had more than 25 books in the home, compared with 85% at Level 2, 94% at Level 3 and 98% at Level 4/5.

LITERACY IN THE WORKPLACE

A larger proportion of workers at Level 4/5 performed four or more reading activities at least weekly than did those at Level 1 (62%-65% compared with 22%-25%, depending on the scale). Similarly, depending on the scale, 52%-55% of those at Level 4/5 performed two or more writing activities at least weekly, compared with 16%-19% of workers at Level 1. The proportion of workers at each level on the prose scale who read or used letters or memos daily increased with higher skill levels. Of workers at Level 1, 31% read or used letters or memos daily, compared with 43% at Level 2, 53% at Level 3 and 63% at Level 4/5. Similarly, the proportion of workers who wrote letters or memos daily increased with skill level. However, at each skill level, smaller proportions wrote letters or memos daily compared with the proportion that read or used letters or memos daily.

PEOPLE WHO NEEDED HELP

Compared to all other levels, much larger proportions of people at Level 1 (on each scale) reported needing help often with various literacy-related activities. On all scales, approximately 7% of people at Level 1 reported needing help often with basic arithmetic, ranging up to 19% who

reported needing help often to read information (in English) from government agencies, businesses or other institutions.

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